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WHEN LEAVES GROW OLD

EGBERT · T · BUSH

WHEN LEAVES GROW OLD

AND OTHER POEMS

BY

EGBERT T. BUSH

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TO

MY GOOD FRIEND

DR. GEORGE N. BEST

WHOSE SKILL, PHILOSOPHY AND KINDLY TOUCHES HAVE SMOOTHED OVER SO MANY OF THE ROUGH PLACES OF LIFE

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WHEN LEAVES GROW OLD

When leaves grow old, a glorious change
From green to tints of flaming red,
Of gold and purple,— passing strange,
When all will soon be brown and dead.
They lend to earth and air and sky
A softer touch, a kindlier cheer,
And scatter joy as days go by,
Though death and nothingness are near.

'Tis written so, old men grow gray;
But why should age be dark or sad?
By the same law old leaves look gay,
And closing days are doubly glad.
Let man so learn; dispensing cheer
From gathered joys of days long past,
May he grow happier year by year,
Like theirs, his brightest days his last.

THE DYING PHILOSOPHER

Farewell, O wondrous world, farewell!
Who dares to speak of thee as vain?
He knows thee not who can but tell
Of woe and wickedness and pain.

'Twas joy to make of thee a shrine,
To supplicate in age and youth,
To seek through all thy laws divine
Some feeble glimmerings of Truth.

'Tis passing now; I bid adieu
To all things loved and cherished here,
To meet whatever may be new
Without a hope, without a fear;

For birth and death are much the same,
And this one truth is all I know:
Out from the great All-Life I came,
Back to the great All-Life I go.

DAYDREAMING

A HOMESICK SOLDIER AT THE FRONT

There's a little brown hut with a crippled door,
And a bulge behind and a sag before,
And a chimney all awry,
And a place in the yard where the roses grow,
And the lilac bushes,— not much, I know,
To attract the passer-by;
But I see it a thousand miles away
As the fairest spot on the earth to-day;
It is home — just home — that's why.

Wild the night, the casement rattled,
Demons smote the window-pane,
Howling winds of goblins tattled
To the driving sleet and rain.

Raging, roaring, shrieking, groaning,
Evil spirits of the air
Seemed for all their sins atoning
In one night of black despair.

While I prayed for something milder,
In my ceaseless, senseless fright,
Wilder, weirder, weirder, wilder
Grew the orgies of the night.

Then, I know not what befell me;
'Twas a strange, a blissful calm,
Something like what poets tell me
Of the isles of spice and palm;

Or of spirits tired and lonely,
Seeking for a perfect rest,
Seeking long, to find it only,
In the regions of the blest.

Soon the stillness grew oppressive;
I could really seem to hear
Silence, in its mood aggressive,
Beating madly at mine ear,

As perhaps all souls poetic
Have, when gazing at the moon,
On some voiceless eve, prophetic
Of disturbance coming soon.

Quickly changed the strange illusion,—
Noise and chaos everywhere,
Then a calm, and then confusion
Filled the earth and filled the air.

Soon I grew enthusiastic;
Pleasing visions flitted past,
Some grotesque and some fantastic,
Each more startling than the last.

Then a form before me floated —
What! the human form divine? —
Closely I its features noted,
And it closely noted mine.

But the maiden stood undaunted —
Maid or matron, boy or man,
Ceaseless doubt my spirit haunted;
Scorn the doubting, ye who can.

Till at last I said unduly,
But with low, respectful bow,
"Speak, I pray thee! tell me truly,
Who and what and whence art thou?"

Faltered she, her tresses loosing,
" Such a greeting for Lorette!
Why should I need introducing?
How can man so soon forget? "

Then I stammered, wildly staring —
I had known Lorette of yore,
But had never seen her wearing
Half so strange a garb before —

" Speak, Lorette, and tell me truly,
If the fair Lorette it be,
What strange impulse, what unruly
Imp or impulse guideth thee? "

And the maiden said undaunted,
" This —' New Woman,' I am she,
By the witless wits all taunted;
Dream Lorette, but witness me."

I replied in tones sarcastic,
" Angels have been known to fall,
But for falling, painful, drastic,
Sweet Lorette hath distanced all! "

Not a word then spoke the maiden;
Backward rolled the flying years
With their joys and sorrows laden,
While her eyes were filled with tears,

And her pain all else confounded,
As in days of long ago,
When her gentle heart was wounded
By some careless verbal blow.

Then I cried, my fault confessing,
"Pardon! Mine be all the blame!
Hearts, despite all forms of dressing,
Hearts will ever be the same!"

Much that night of madness brought me;
Never can I quite forget
That one lesson madly taught me
By the vanishing Lorette.

THE SONG OF THE FROG

THERE are those who contend that no musical
notes,
Whether high, low or middle, e'er came from the
throats
Of the poor, despised frogs in the pond or the
marsh,
And declare all such sounds are exceedingly
harsh.

But I pity the man,
Whatsoever his name,
Who in soberness can
Such an error proclaim;
For the man who was reared
By the side of the bog
Will ever be cheered
By the song of the frog.

Though I love all the songsters of field and of
glen —
The gay chatting catbird, the pert little wren,
The robin that carols above his low nest
When the big vernal sun settles down in the
west;

Yet for soul-stirring songs,
For the music that thrills,
That for which the heart longs,
Let me flee from the hills;

For the man who was reared
By the side of the bog
Will ever be cheered
By the song of the frog.

Truly sweet is the oriole's whistle of love,
And so sweet is the sad, cooing note of the dove,
But sweeter by far is the song of the frogs,
With their "pedledig-digs" and their "polli-
wog-wogs";

Then give back the old scene,
Let me hear the old song;
Though long years intervene,
Yet old memories throng
On the man who was reared
By the side of the bog,
And will ever be cheered
By the song of the frog.

Of things that are and yet are not, how oft
The mind unfettered dreams! And in that realm
What can and what can never be unite
To turn the flimsiest semblance into fact.
The poet's mind is but an atmosphere
In which the weightiest things as lightly float
As thistle-down in air.

To him that dreameth not, visions like these
Are but the fantasies of fevered brain;
But to the dreamer, though his dreams sublime
In deep recesses of his inmost soul
Be ever hid, they compass wondrous truth.
The laws of Nature, deepest things of God,
Which oft in vain hath Wisdom boldly sought
In ev'ry age to fathom, these and more,
Oft mirrored false, by times are mirrored true.

Thus Orwald dreamed, and from some baseless height
Beheld a cheerless earth, all dead and cold;
No warming sun, no light but from the stars,
Which, twinkling not, looked coldly down
Upon another world whose race was run;
For suns and planets, like all minor things,
Perforce obey one universal law —

Growth, function, and decay. Though Nature seem
Unfeeling and remorseless, all is well,
For God is Nature, and her changeless laws
Are the eternal God.

The Wind, of Sun and Atmosphere the child,
Forgotten with its parents, sighed no more;
Dead silence reigned, and there was none to know
Save quaking Orwald, he whose bursting ear,
Imprisoning sound that fain would break its bars
And into silence leap to lose itself
In nothingness, beat fierce with maddening pain.

Of all that man e'er compassed naught remained;
Of man himself, one lone and pallid corse,
Seeming embalmed in everlasting ice.
Earth's last inhabitant lay here entombed,
With all his worldly wealth for sepulture;
The world had been his own, and yet how poor!
A surfeit and a dearth, all things and naught,
Too much and not enough. In death his form,
Alone in that sublimest of all tombs,
Seemed ill at ease, yet grinning at decay.

Of man's stupendous works, no shadow left;
His loves, his hates, his stern, relentless wars
That drenched of old the hapless earth in blood,
His kindness and his cruelty, all now
As though they never were. Man, earth and air,
And all things else, a milllion years before,
Had filled their mission in the Universe,
And only this dead globe, a worthless speck,
Afloat in endless space, remained.

The vision changing, quickly then befell
Earth's last catastrophe. Imprisoned force,
That more and more kept pressing from within,
As frost went creeping to the very core,
Asunder burst the brittle shell and hurled
Its myriad atoms into space, perchance,
As meteoric dust, in other atmospheres to burn.

THE OLD VAN DOLAH SCHOOL

BACHELOR JOE'S LAMENT

(Stone house built in 1822, torn down in 1907 to make a new foundation.)

It's crowding on to seventy years,
Yet I recall each rule
We learned through all our hopes and fears
In the old Van Dolah School.

But I remember better yet
The laughing boys and girls,
With eyes of blue and eyes of jet,
And Prue with the sunny curls.

No, never was a girl like Prue —
For me, a living rule;
Her word my law and Gospel too,
In the old Van Dolah School.

It's crowding on to sixty years
She has slept that sleep divine,
While all the sighs and all the tears
And all the dreams were mine.

I've watched the merry children play,
As one might watch his own,
And children's children to this day,
Around that "heap of stone."

Alas, alas, condemned to fall! —
The need by no means clear —
With every crack in the crumbling wall
And every stone so dear!

Oh, gently pry those stones apart,
Suppress that careless shout;
Strike softly, 'tis an old man's heart
Thy pick is tearing out!

The new upon the old must rest,
A basis firm and fast;
Of all foundations, this is best —
The solid, tested past.

Farewell, dear shrine! Old hearts will trace
Love's emblems round thee still;
A loftier now will take thy place —
Will take, but never fill.

He was bleared and begrimed and distorted
This irreverent son of the slum,
And from him, take his life as reported,
Nothing good would be likely to come.

He had shattered the Decalogue sadly,
If the stories they told were half true;
He had rushed into wickedness madly,
And the laws he regarded were few.

He had stolen of sanctified treasure,
He had answered reproof with a blow,
He had doted on sin as a pleasure,
And had sent half the saints down below.

. . . . . .

Through the smoke and the shouts and confusion,
Came a mother's disconsolate wail,
"O my babe!" Then a reckless intrusion
Made the stoutest and bravest turn pale.

All in vain they endeavored to hold him
From his madness profanely sublime;
'Twas his one holy impulse controlled him —
"I'll but jump into hell 'fore my time!"

They have carved him a neat introduction
To the marble-commemorate brave,
And the one that he snatched from destruction
Keeps the flowers still fresh on his grave.

Bubbling over, broadly grinning,
Full of life and joy, you know,
Listening to the old folks spinning
Musty yarns of long ago;

Thus we sat and watched the embers —
Curious creatures live in fire;
Every old-time boy remembers
How they glow with heart's desire.

Grandpa sat with Uncle Deering,
Telling how it was of yore,
Word for word as in our hearing
Half a hundred times before.

Never thought we then of wronging;
As the flames went dancing high,
Half in mirth and half in longing,
How we sniggered, you and I!

Sixty years! 'Tis only seeming!
Time should scorn to trifle thus;
But we giggled, little dreaming
Boys so soon would laugh at us.

In the midst of confusion and squalor and want,
Where crime was no stranger and hunger was gaunt,
Where the street was an alley so narrow and drear
That the sun did not notice it once in a year,
Lived Lucille and her mother,— none knew whence they came,
And the world whispered meanly, " A daughter of shame: "
'Twas a frail bark afloat on an ocean of sin,
With a thousand waves leaping to gather it in.

Frail and wasted, the mother toiled on with a will,
That the bloom might not fade from the cheek of Lucille,
And the daughter, as anxious her mother to save,
Worked with hand and with head and with heart truly brave.
Then the Messenger came, and Lucille was alone
Where the shadows were thick and the sun never shone:
Oh, that frail bark afloat on an ocean of sin,
With the mad waves all eager to gather it in!

Then Lucille, fighting madly as never before
To keep hope in the heart and the wolf from the door,
Saw with double dismay all the sickening lure
That is spread to bewilder the young and the pure;
For temptations grew thick as the bubbles on foam,
Till the brave heart grew sick in that desolate home:
Yet the bark floating over that ocean of sin,
Still defied the wild waves that would gather it in.

Oh, the glory of womanhood, noble and pure!
With its magic defending, the frail are secure.
When a sweetly true woman does nobly her part,
The divine law will bring her some other true heart;
All the shadows dispelled by that heavenly flame,
In an alley and avenue ever the same,
Left the bark floating free from that ocean of sin
Whose mad waves are still gathering weaker ones in.

On thee, O woman, in thy normal state,
Hang all the destinies: if thou but feel
And know thy power, but think and know and
feel
All that the world in its majestic swing
Must ever owe to thee; ay, even more,
What thou in turn must owe, how big must loom
Thyself unto thyself; and how must shrink,
And shrink to nothingness, all save thy woman-
hood!

But thy "career"? 'Tis noblest when 'tis
least
As reckoned by the rules that measure man;
Most woman thou as least a man, and thus
Beyond all measure great; in thy career,
As Nature meant thee, as must ever be
The woman true to self and to the race,
Spurning the gauds that flatter man,
In thine own sacred realm, a queen uncrowned.

Pure eloquence, the lips that hint of love!
No need have these of fiery speech to sway
Unthinking masses; as in joy they kiss
The cooing babe pressed to the heaving breast,
They speak in eloquence outreaching far
The fire of Cicero, and wield a power
Beyond the reach of words, beyond the craft
Of statesmanship or clash of war.

HAFEZ THE HERMIT

I

Of life's young pleasures and of age's care,
And all between them, have I had my share;
Now, calmly waiting for a peaceful end,
Let me with candor to such thoughts attend
As fill the active mind of thinking man,
That others draw from them the good they can —
Yes, all they can — and let them ever pray
That none by groundless fears be led astray;
For, spite of Error's wails and Creed's alarm,
Was ever honest thought a source of harm?

II

Hafez the Hermit, thus do people name
Me of the forest; it is all the same;
What pleases them is no offense to me
In this low hut, with squirrel, bird and tree,
Unsullied nature as a constant joy,
And nothing civilized for base alloy.
True, I may err, as better men have done;
Perfection, mark it well, applies to none;
Here for the right, though haply sometimes wrong,
Will Hafez as the bird sing free his song.

III

Reflection is the school through which in turn
To know the present and the past unlearn,
To seek unhampered the enduring truth,
As winnowed from the errors learned in youth;
For much was taught me in my early days
Concerning life, and the mysterious ways
Of Him that ruleth, much that seemed to need
Severe revision for a working creed;
And I was taught, by those in duty bound
To look superior and appear profound,
When doubts loomed dark in my restricted ken,
To bow submissive and to say Amen.

IV

Nor were such teachings all of major things,
As God's deep mysteries and the right of kings,
But compassed many others, small and great,
From planting onions to affairs of state,
From coaxing butter from the witch-bound
cream
To making simple words not what they seem;
And what to me was ever doubly queer,
That men should now and evermore revere
Things wise or foolish which the great had said,
Especially if the great were long time dead.

V

Strange how the poet, artist, sculptor, sage,
Like wine and statesmen, all improve with age!
And even lesser folk, if seen at all,
Appear much bigger through a distant pall,
And curious maxims and perplexing rules
Which sometime may have been the sport of fools,
May grow through years of struggle and of strife
To be the standards of a higher life!
Thus systems crude, provoking scoffs and jeers,
May be transmuted by the rolling years
Into pure Gospel, fraught with magic grace
To guide the nations and redeem the race.
O wondrous alchemy! O lens of time!
The dross turns gold, the trivial looms sublime!

VI

A time there was when all accepted schools
Dispensed less wisdom than established rules;
When teachers great, whatever else they taught,
Dared scarcely venture to encourage thought —
Such virile thought as, independent, moves
Beyond the limits of well-traveled grooves;
For thoughts, wild creatures of the roving mind,
Like breachy cattle must be well confined,
And laws grown hoary by the lapse of time,
Make questioning error and rejection crime.

VII

Hafez grows old, but is the world so changed
That from such follies it is now estranged?
Well, changed or not, a few mild strictures may
Be not unsuited to the present day.
'Tis clear no world, as neither sage nor dunce,
Can change its mode of doing all at once;
So let me treat it as it used to be,
While others shun whatever wrong they see;
But let me warn them to beware of this:
To-day sees little in itself amiss,
And looks with pity on the days gone by,
As days when everything was much awry.

VIII

Yet, strange to say, man looks into the past,
The dim and distant, for the things that last,
For laws and morals of the basic kind
To fix his status and direct his mind,
To keep his actions under safe control,
To shape his manners and to save his soul!
Strange contradiction in the ways of man,
The past and present both are under ban,
The past for things esteemed of little weight,
The present for all those accounted great.
Men cry, "What progress! Wondrous strides
behold!"
Then meekly bow before the musty old.

IX

How bootless time in litigation spent
When reason counts for less than precedent,
When most depends on what the Court has read
Of what some human owlet sometime said,
When technicality is higher law,
And Justice trips on microscopic flaw,
When what has been determines present right,
And Courts look back to see the forward light!
Thus neatly nature is by man outdone,—
She paints no peaches with the last year's sun.

X

Through weary weeks, through months of sunless days,
The just have suffered by the law's delays,
And hoped and prayed, with many a bitter groan,
That law would somehow give them back their own;
And widows pinched and hapless orphans pined
While some nice phrase was learnedly defined,
That rogues might issue victors from the fight
And flaunt their triumph in the face of Right.
Let Justice perish, so the case but show
The puzzling rules the learned Court must know.

XI

Through prejudice was Innocense ensnared
In legal meshes, and his guilt declared;
Stays and appeals from court to higher court,
Through Grand Tribunal of the Last Resort,
Effected nothing more than just to show
That each sustained proceedings down below;
No " error " found in ruling or in mode,
All lying must have been by legal code;
And higher courts are not supposed to care
About the truth of things to which men swear,
Or other trifles which so sorely vex
The silly layman and his soul perplex,
But to be vigilant in hope to find
Some " error " that may shock the legal mind;
None such appeared, the case was fairly tried,
The courts stood flawless, and the victim died.

XII

Men may grow better, but there's ample room
For greater action in the moral " boom! "
Morals and manners do, of course, progress,
No one would willingly acknowledge less,
For he whose youth was suitably controlled
Accepts as truth what he is sagely told,
And various factors forcibly combine
To point out truth along that general line;
And yet, in spite of all the " proofs " we use,
How many things the active mind confuse,
And make one ask, when men declare they know,
In quiet undertone, " But is it so? "

XIII

And woman, styled the "better half" of man,
Puts all his major vices under ban,
And minor follies to at least a score
Mildly condemns, yet loves them even more,
Detests his crudeness and condemns his strife,
And to a higher plane directs her life.
And yet it always looks so nice and cool
Along the borders of the Sinful Pool,
That on its brink she sports, untouched by sin,
Unless by some mischance she tumbles in;
Then for her ducking, rivals all may thank
Some reckless playmate or a slippery bank;
Whate'er the cause, to all it should be known
The real fault can never be her own;
Her faith triumphant as she scrambles out,
Her cold experience rarely leads to doubt.

XIV

Among the tasks that spring from men's resolve
To know the wherefore and the truth evolve,
To probe all secrets and all nooks explore
Of mystic mountain and of psychic shore,
To snatch her jewels from Dame Nature's chest,
And try their quality by acid test,
'Tis not most difficult of all to show
A country's morals, like its flora, grow;
For morals best, disprove it ye who can,
Are man's best thought on what is best for man.

XV

The wise ones tell us that this ceaseless climb
Is hopeless struggle t'ward what Infant Time
Saw in perfection as the state of man,
When this his strange career on earth began!
Now, if perchance this doctrine should be true,
Would that explain the curious things we do?
In pressing on by leaps and bounds, alack,
We prove both progress and a slipping back!
Just as we did a thousand years before,
We sign peace treaties, and prepare for war;
Our argument to honeyed phrases runs,
All punctuated with the roar of guns.

XVI

Expect some laughter as the gods review
The contradictory things we mortals do,
And most of all expect derision when
We prate of brotherhood and slaughter men.
We teach forgiveness in our prayer and song,
Then fight like demons over fancied wrong;
We love our neighbors as in Scripture told,
But kill for boundaries and kill for gold;
We fight and pray and on our faith we dote,
We trust in God, but shun the leaky boat.

XVII

To heathen lands our messengers we send,
And with our kind regards oppression blend;
To starving souls we ship the "Bread of Life,"
All neatly packed among the tools of strife;
Our keen solicitude for souls of men
Is deep and wide and ever warm, but then
We count not only on the converts made,
But reckon chances for increasing trade.
When fear and inborn wickedness combine,
And men perverse our benefits decline,
We gently force them to the means of grace,
To honor Heaven and advance the race;
We grasp the rifle and we draw the sword,—
Our burden bearing, thus we serve the Lord.

XVIII

Nor need we look to heathen lands alone
For those who need our favors; in our own,
Before, behind us, everywhere we turn,
Are souls to save and heretics to burn —
Not real burning in the good old way,
But by the milder, meaner of to-day.
We build no fires, but in a hundred ways
We "roast" the heretic and blight his days,
And this the logic: He is scouting fire,
And in our tender love 'tis our desire
That he should here and now be made to feel
A touch of what the future must reveal.

XIX

How strange that erring mortal should conceive
The thought to know what others must believe,
And fix the penalty for unbelief
By billions times that meted to the thief!
If Heaven's justice were ordained to feed
On what men's folly has in vain decreed,
How little comfort would there be for some
In either this world or a world to come!
For some? For any; each in turn contemned,
All are in justice equally condemned
By equal courts, each erring one to bear
Of proper punishment his boundless share;
Let faith be hoary old or faith be new,
Each must be heretic from another's view.

XX

Men must supply their spiritual needs
Through twenty systems and a thousand creeds,
And every one by inspiration given,
As votaries prove by special seal from Heaven;
And if to doubt some erring mortal dares,
Each proves the seal by what that seal declares,—
A most convenient means of proving, this;
If rightly used, 'twas never known to miss.
Thus systems all reverse the usual case
And stand most firmly on least stable base;
For systems must from logic stand aloof,
And of their error boldly challenge proof.

XXI

May Hafez never, never even try,
By specious argument or cultured lie,
To prove what faith or form or creed is best,
And stand, if tried, condemned by all the rest.
Of the Beyond — take this, at least, as true —
You know as much as I, and I as you,
And I know nothing, just as priest and sage
Have known in every land and every age.
Man forms his theories and sets his rules
To fit his system, or his lack, of schools;
Makes gods and laws to fit his own accord,
And then proclaims to all: "Thus saith the Lord."

XXII

All faith is good that warms or cheers the heart,
All doubt is good that plays some noble part;
Faith binds to good and bad of yesterday,
While doubt for all improvement clears the way;
Man needs them both, as once perhaps his fins,
His strange delusions, his discarded sins,
The contradictions that still mark his life,
His gentle virtues and his love of strife,
The faith that holds him to a narrow course,
The doubt that serves as an expansive force,
His godlike love, his more than demon hate,
His gravitation to the small, the great;
All, all seem needed in the general plan
From small amœba to evolve the man.

XXIII

Then let us wonder not that men are queer,
But marvel most that man as Man is here,
Upsprung from nothing, or from dust of ground —
If understood, perhaps a truth profound,
Not needing myth or theologic aid
To show from what the primal man was made,
Or how, evolving from his low estate,
Through force inherent, he became so great;
For faith and science grudgingly unite
To call that dust-born story partly right —
Yes, right as Oriental stories go —
Man's lowly origin as truth to show.
There 's no great controversy now, and yet
Some think that " dust " was comfortably wet.

XXIV

The stream flows south, as writers all would say,
Yet here and there along its crooked way,
Flows east, flows west, flows north, to reach the mouth
Serenely waiting in the distant south.
So man, progressing in his upward climb,
Shows not the same advancement all the time;
Now right, now left, now even turning back,
On life's steep hill he leaves a puzzling track,
But still tends upward by as natural force
As holds the river in its downward course:
In spite of contradictions, vice and sin,
Man still mounts upward by a force within.

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